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ABSTRACT

A much better understanding of the ability of some minority students at predominantly White post-secondary institutions to effectively adapt to the academic demands of their campus climates is essential to the success of policies designed to enhance learning for the increasingly diverse student populations. This study investigated influences of gender and socioeconomic status on assertiveness for Black ffeshmen and juniors (n=560) on the campuses of four Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Several variables were identified which appear to be survival factors for Black students on PWIs. The study concludes by noting that the recruitment and retention of post-secondary level minority students at PWIs has suffered because higher educational research has neither produced a generally accepted theoretical explanation for the successful persistence of some Black students on PWIs, nor yet focused on culturally unique non-cognitive type interaction variables that might help to explain the low persistence rates of Black students with strong academic backgrounds. Contains 21 references. (TS)

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Survival Factors for Black Students on Predominantly White Campuses

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INTRODUCTION

A much better understanding of the ability of some minority students at predominantly White post-secondary institutions to effectively adapt to the academic demands of their campus climates is essential to the success of policies designed to enhance learning for the increasingly diverse student populations within college and university communities. Recent shifts in Black American college enrollment indicate that more than half of the nation's Black college students are now enrolled in PWIs – predominantly White institutions (Carter & Wilson, 1992). As the number of Black Americans achieving admission to higher education increases, the majority of these students will attend institutions in which the campus population is predominantly White and where Blacks are experiencing significantly negative side effects associated with social isolation and alienation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) hypothesized, after an extensive review of prior research, that attendance at predominantly White colleges does not enhance the educational attainment of Black

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students, and that the reason for this lack of educational attainment "is difficult to determine from the [previous research] evidence presented", (p. 382). Research by Jackson (1992) indicated that most Black college students attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) leave by their sophomore year.

Historically, there has been much discussion in the literature concerning the declining pool of urban minority students with the capacity to successfully participate in post-secondary educational programs (Jackson, 1992). This discussion has produced a large amount of research aimed at developing more effective strategies for the recruitment and retention of minority students. Research has resulted in the identification of a large number of cognitive and non-cognitive variables that appear to be related to the college retention, attrition and persistence of Black college students.

In 1966, Pervin, Reik and Dalrymple noted that at the University of California, "only the top 15 percent of high-school graduates are eligible for admission, yet 45 percent of the students withdraw before completing the requirements for a degree" (p. 8). These authors also stated that at Pennsylvania State University, "over 74 percent of the freshman class came from the top two-fifths of their high-school class, yet over 50 percent of the class did not graduate in four years, and in spite of a considerable increase in admission selectivity over the previous decade, the withdrawal rate showed little change" (p. 8). Clearly, academic ability alone was not sufficient for

the identification of defective students or the prediction of student success. Pervin and others concluded that non-academic or non-cognitive variables were of considerable importance in the persistence of college students.

In 1972, Willie and McCord found that because Black students expected more social acceptance than they found at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), their resulting anger and despair contributed to a desire to socially and culturally segregate themselves from White students. Cheek (1976), proposed a conceptual modification of the theoretical base associated with traditional assertive behavior paradigms in order to include Black cultural experiences. Cheek (1976), believed that passive Black temperament was a normal expression of people who had lifestyles conditioned by the lingering effects of the "Jim Crow Halo Effect" (p. 38). Cheek used the term *passive* (where others would later used the terms non-assertive or submissive) when describing Black student behavior in predominantly White environments.

A major study by Fleming (1984) suggested that Black students at PWIs were less likely to persist, until graduation, for a variety of reasons that were only secondarily associated with academic performance. Higher education's pool of potential students is increasingly made up of minority youth, however, while more than 65% of the nation's Black college students are enrolled in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), less than 20% of all the degrees earned by Black students are

produced at PWIs (Fleming, 1984). Fleming (1984), indicated that Black female students at predominantly White campuses tended to become more socially assertive and manipulative. Fleming viewed Black female students' college institutional interactions as being dominated by the need to assert themselves in response to an unresponsive or hostile environment. However, Fleming found that Black male students who persist at predominantly White institutions, when compared to males at historically Black colleges, appeared to lose their social assertiveness and become submissive to external authority. Fleming's study described regional variations in Black student temperament factors which supported the earlier work of Willie & McCord (1972).

Persistence for successful Black students appears to depend primarily on *desocialization* or how well students are able to change their cultural interaction styles in order to accommodate predominantly White campus situations (Loo & Rolison, 1986). Students who were unable to adjust to university environments were characterized as being assertive, hostile, immature, non-conforming, impetuous, aloof, resentful of college rules and regulations, opinionated, distrustful of authority, self-centered, loners, uncertain of the future, interpersonally alien, critical, and uncooperative. Comparisons between persisting and non-persisting students, in the literature, often identified assertiveness as one temperament characteristic of Black students who voluntarily withdraw from an institution (Spaights, Kenner, & Dixon,

1987). Tinto (1987) revised his earlier interaction models to include additional social incongruent variables particularly related to Black college student persistence. Black students were most likely to leave college because of serious adjustment difficulties experienced during the transition from a familiar way of life to an unfamiliar environment. "For that reason one would expect that persons from cultural backgrounds and/or home communities with low rates of higher educational participation (e.g., persons from disadvantaged backgrounds) may face particularly severe handicaps in attempting to complete higher educational degree programs. In trying to do so they may frequently be forced to, at least partially, reject membership in communities that have been part of their upbringing" (Tinto, 1987, p. 61). As a result, "A major barrier to black student retention is the perception by black students that they are outsiders in the academic world, aliens in a hostile environment" (Gibbs, 1988, p. 353). Gibbs (1988) identified *withdrawal* as the most common adaptation response that Black students employed in coping with identity conflicts associated with White educational environments. Withdrawal was described as the wish to avoid contact with conflict producing situations. The second most common coping adaptation was described by Gibbs as *separation* which was characterized by anger, hostility, and contempt for White middle-class values and behavior patterns.

"Minorities on Campus," a 1989 publication of the American Council on Education (ACE) noted that, despite the best efforts of universities in trying to promote the

recruitment and retention of minority students, "The gap between the participation rates of white students and minority students is growing, and attrition is a major problem" (Green, 1989, p. 1). ACE concluded that, "we are painfully aware that the current conceptual framework is not fully adequate; in some areas, we need new language to shape the discussion" (Green, 1989, p. 181). Porter (1990) research supported the ACE report's conclusions and revealed the "puzzling finding" that "Among black students, the students in the highest ability quartile were less likely to complete and more likely to drop out than all other black students except those in the lowest test-score group" (p. 34).

Steward, Jackson & Jackson (1990) found a general consensus in the research literature which suggested that Black students at predominantly White institutions possessed unique interaction style behaviors that were possibly gender influenced but were generally not well investigated. Steward, Jackson, & Jackson believed that it was necessary for successful Black students to interact differently when in a minority campus status than when in an all-Black campus situation. Their research concluded that "Black students on predominantly White campuses must acknowledge the value of remaining a 'stranger' to protect themselves from events that might contribute to academic demise" (Steward et al., 1990, p. 515). As a result, Black and White students became divided into two mutually exclusive campus social communities. Numerous reports of racism and cultural insensitivity on many college campuses

suggest that these exclusive campus communities are engaging in cultural conflict.

Ross & Jackson (1991) concluded that the cultural interaction styles of many Black students are probably perceived as potentially threatening, eliciting fear reactions in White faculty and administrators. Successful Black students (especially males) tend to be conforming and submissive (Ross and Jackson, 1991). Sadberry-Wilson, Winfield & Royster (1991) supported Ross & Jackson by reporting on research which notes that "behaviors viewed as positive for Whites (e.g., aggressive, go-getter) are viewed negatively for African-Americans (e.g., dangerous, needing external controls)" (Sadberry-Wilson et al., 1991, p. 88). While many other researchers questioned the utility of grades and test scores and suggested that non-cognitive factors played more important roles in the prediction of Black student persistence than traditional academic characteristics, there was little agreement between studies as to the exact identity of these factors. Therefore, efforts to assess and plan for changes in the landscape of academic learning must include policies focused on the development, in new campus arrivals, of effective learning behaviors associated with successful minority students currently attending predominantly White institutions.

PURPOSE

The information contained in this presentation resulted from research data generated by an unpublished Emory University dissertation study. The purpose of the study was to investigate the influences of gender and socioeconomic status on

assertiveness for Black Freshmen and Juniors on the campuses of four predominantly White universities. This study resulted in the identification of several factors associated with the survival of successful Black students at predominantly White universities which have not been extensively investigated by previous research.

PROCEDURE

A combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques was used to investigate gender differences in Black student assertiveness on predominantly White university campuses. Quantitative data were collected from 560 Black Freshmen and Juniors attending four southeastern schools of higher education during the 1995 academic year. Assertiveness was measured by the *College Self Expression Scale* (CSES, Galassi, 1974). A general linear model was used to quantitatively analyze the data with assertiveness as the dependent variable and student gender, school year, and socioeconomic status as independent variables. Gender, school year, and socioeconomic status were not found to have a statistically significant effect on assertiveness for these Black students. All students had higher mean scores for negative assertiveness (anger-expressing behaviors) than for positive assertiveness (friendly-affectionate behaviors).

Qualitative data were collected from 21 key informants selected from the quantitative respondents. Qualitatively, peer group influences were found to be one of the major factors affecting the campus survival of Black students attending

the four predominantly White universities involved in this study.

Comparison of the data from the assertiveness scale, in-depth personal interviews, and the results from other research literature allowed for the qualitative findings to be triangulated across several sources. The results from this analysis indicate that there appear to be several peer group type factors associated with the survival of successful Black students at predominantly White universities which require investigation.

FINDINGS

A number of variables were identified, from key informant interviews, which appear to be survival factors for Black students on predominantly White campuses. The following factors were identified:

1. Black students defined student assertiveness as campus involvement, but made a strong distinction between campus social and academic assertiveness behaviors.
2. Black students felt that there were gender differences associated with student assertiveness, and these gender differences were non-traditional (females more assertive) for on-campus academic behaviors and traditional (males more assertive) for on-campus social behaviors.
3. The school year of Black students influenced both their social and academic assertiveness, as seniors were just trying to get out (graduate).
4. The socioeconomic backgrounds of Black students did not influence their campus

academic assertive behaviors but did influence their campus social assertiveness.

5. Black students felt the need to adapt their assertiveness styles to their campus environments.
6. Black students believed that their personal assertiveness style had positively affected their academic campus survival.
7. Black students assertiveness styles were primarily determined by their family backgrounds but changed as a result of campus peer group influences.
8. The factor that most Black students reported as contributing to their survival at predominantly White institutions involved some form of peer group support, followed by determination to succeed, parents/family support, and faculty support.
9. Black students believed that student assertiveness would be defined differently on historically Black campuses because of the situational aspects of student assertiveness.

DISCUSSION

It is hoped that theoretical discussions resulting from this presentation will promote a better understanding of Black student persistence and generate additional research interest in the following areas:

© The use of minority peer counselors to identify students in trouble and convince them to seek academic or social services support.

© The development of more relevant research instruments for examining the academic and social characteristics that may be unique to successful minority students at predominantly White campuses.

© The academic support roles provided by informal campus minority peer group relationships and an understanding of the need to foster a climate supportive of such student relationships.

© The formal campus development of academically oriented peer organizations among and between minority students.

© The provision of university sponsored workshops for minority peer groups in teamwork, study skills, group dynamics, decision-making, campus services, etc.

© The creation of positive linkages between campus minority peer organizations and off campus community service organizations.

© The utilization of academically strong minority upper-classmen and alumni as mentors, tutors and or advisors for minority peer group organizations.

Higher educational research has not currently produced a generally accepted theoretical explanation for the successful persistence of some Black students on predominantly White campuses (PWIs). Research has not focused on culturally unique non-cognitive type interaction variables that might help to explain the low persistence rates of Black students with strong academic backgrounds. As a result, the development of more effective strategies for the recruitment and retention of post-

secondary level minority students has suffered.

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